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ABSTRACT

This document is a brief summary of the National Study of Social Services to Children and Their Families. Conducted by the United States Children's Bureau, the survey was planned to answer a number of questions about public social service programs: How many children receive service? Who are the children and their families? Why do they come to the social agencies? and, What services do they receive? Data were collected from a representative sample of 315 public service departments throughout the United States. Case-by-case data were requested from each department on samples of children being served by each participating agency at the end of March 1977. A total of 9,597 children were surveyed. (MP)

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MATRIX NO. 30

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NATIONAL STUDY OF SOCIAL SERVICES TO CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES: DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

by

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and

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PS012896

A BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE
NATIONAL STUDY OF SOCIAL SERVICES TO
CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES
OVERVIEW*

This survey was planned by the Children's Bureau to answer a number of questions about public social service programs for children and their families. How many children receive service? Who are the children and their families? Why do they come to agencies? What services do they receive? Answers to these questions are of the utmost importance to administrators, policy makers, and legislators, but only a few communities now have this information available.

To obtain current information about clientele and services, a representative sample of 315 public social service departments throughout the United States was selected to participate in the survey. Case-by-case data were requested on samples of the children being served by each participating agency at the end of March 1977. A total of 9,5[illegible]7 children was surveyed. This report presents preliminary estimates on the characteristics of the children and their families and on the services they received.

Demographic and Social Characteristics

As in 1961, boys composed a slight majority--52%--of the children served in 1977 (Chart 1). The median age of the children in 1977 was 9.2 years, compared to the 1961 median of 9.9. There are approximately 83,000 infants; 609,000 children between 1 and 6 years of age; 341,000 children between 7 and 10; and 735,000 children 11 or older. The age distribution paralleled that of the United States population as of July 1, 1976 (Table 1).

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*Prepared for: United States Children's Bureau, Administration for Children, Youth and Families, July 1978.

Chart 1. Sex of children receiving social services from public agencies

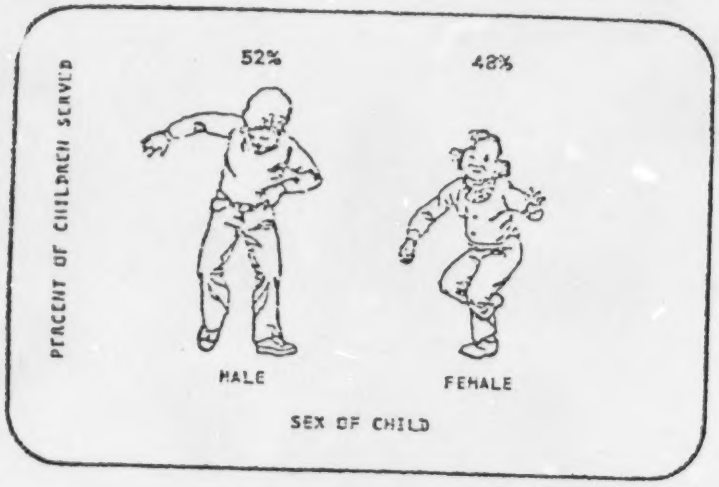


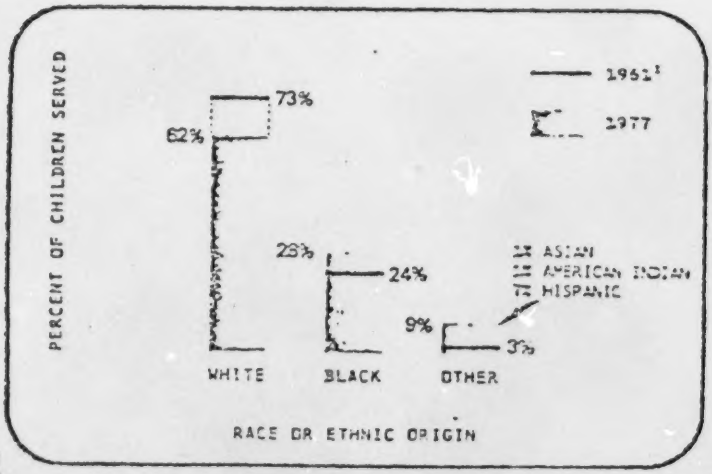
Table 1. Age of children receiving social services from public agencies

Age	Survey population (1977)		Total U.S. population, 197
	Number (thousands)	Percent[1]	Percent[1]
Under 1 year	83	5	5
1-3 years	283	16	14
4-6 years	326	18	16
7-10 years	341	19	22
11-14 years	398	22	25
15-17 years	337	19	19
Total	1,768	100	100

[1]Percents will vary slightly due to rounding.

Of the children whose race was identified in the current study, 62% were white; 28%, black; 7%, Hispanic; and 1% each, Asian-Pacific and Indian-Alaskan. The figures for the 1961 study were 73% white; 24% black; and only 3% of any other race (Chart 2). Thus, there was some increase in the black proportion. The emergence of a distinct Hispanic clientele of 120,000, a group not separately identified in 1961, is also apparent. The median ages were: black--8.2 years; white--9.8 years; and Hispanic--9.9 years.

Chart 2. Race or ethnic origin of children receiving social services from public agencies

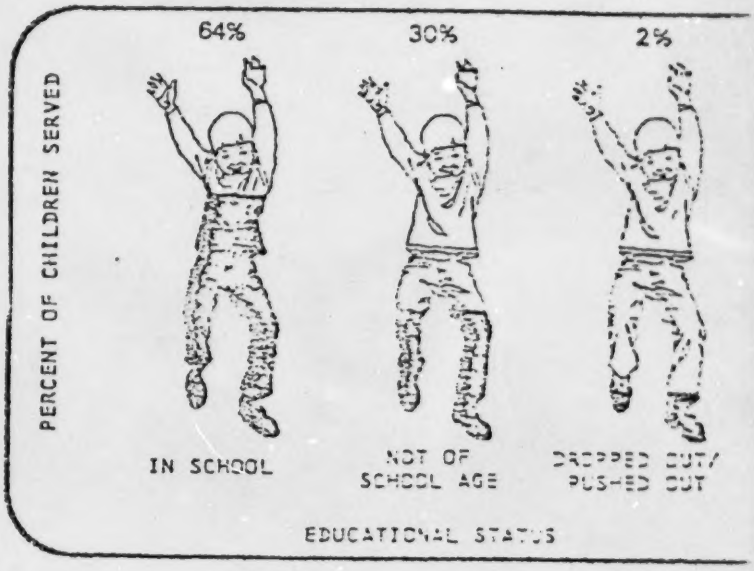


Source: [1]Children, Problems, and Services in Child Welfare Programs, 1961

Nearly a third of the children (30%) were reported as "not of school age," although some very young children were in preschool programs. Most of the rest (64%) were in school, including 109,000 children in special education or ungraded classes (Chart 3). The remaining 5% were almost evenly divided between those who had dropped out or had been pushed out (43,000), and those not attending for other reasons (49,000). The percentages of various age groups attending school were:

Age	Percent in school
4-6 years	45
7-10 years	98
11-14 years	95
15-17 years	82

Chart 3. Educational status of children rece: social services from public agencies



Living Arrangements and Family Circumstances

The difference in living arrangements for the children served in 1961 and 1977 highlights the difference in the coverage of the two surveys. The 1961 survey did not include service to children in AFDC families unless the children were served by child welfare units. The 1977 survey included all children who were receiving services from a specialized child welfare unit or a unit serving children and families. In 1977 well over one million of the children served lived with one or both parents--60%, compared with 37% in 1961. The largest

single group was 40% living with the mother only (Chart 4). The proportions living with both parents and with father only were 15% and 5%, respectively. The proportion of children served who lived with other relatives was 8%.

Conversely, the percentage of children in foster care decreased from 47% in 1961 to 28% in 1977. The main component of the foster care population, children in foster family homes, dropped from 35% to 22%. The decline in the institutional segment was even steeper, from 12% to 4%. The decline in the percentage of children in foster care should not be confused with a decrease in actual numbers. The 28% in foster care in 1977 represented 500,000 children, nearly three times the number in foster care under the supervision of public agencies in 1961. The 22% in foster family homes number 395,000, compared with about 132,000 in 1961.

The relation of living arrangement to the child's age is shown in Table 2. The proportion of children living with parents decreases as age increases after age 6, while the proportion living with relatives stays constant, and the proportion in foster care rises. Although children in adoptive homes are spread across the age groups, only in the under-one-year age group were more than 3% of the children in adoptive homes.

The parents or relatives responsible for the care of the children, or the persons to whom they would return from foster care, were described as the principal child-caring persons. For three-fourths of the children, the mother occupied this role of principal child-caring person, for 8%, it was the father, and for 6%, another relative. Eight percent of the children had no principal child-caring person (Chart 5). Just over a third of the principal child-caring persons were employed, usually full time. A like proportion was not in the labor force, and a little less than a third were unemployed.

Chart 4. Living arrangement of children receiving social services from public agencies

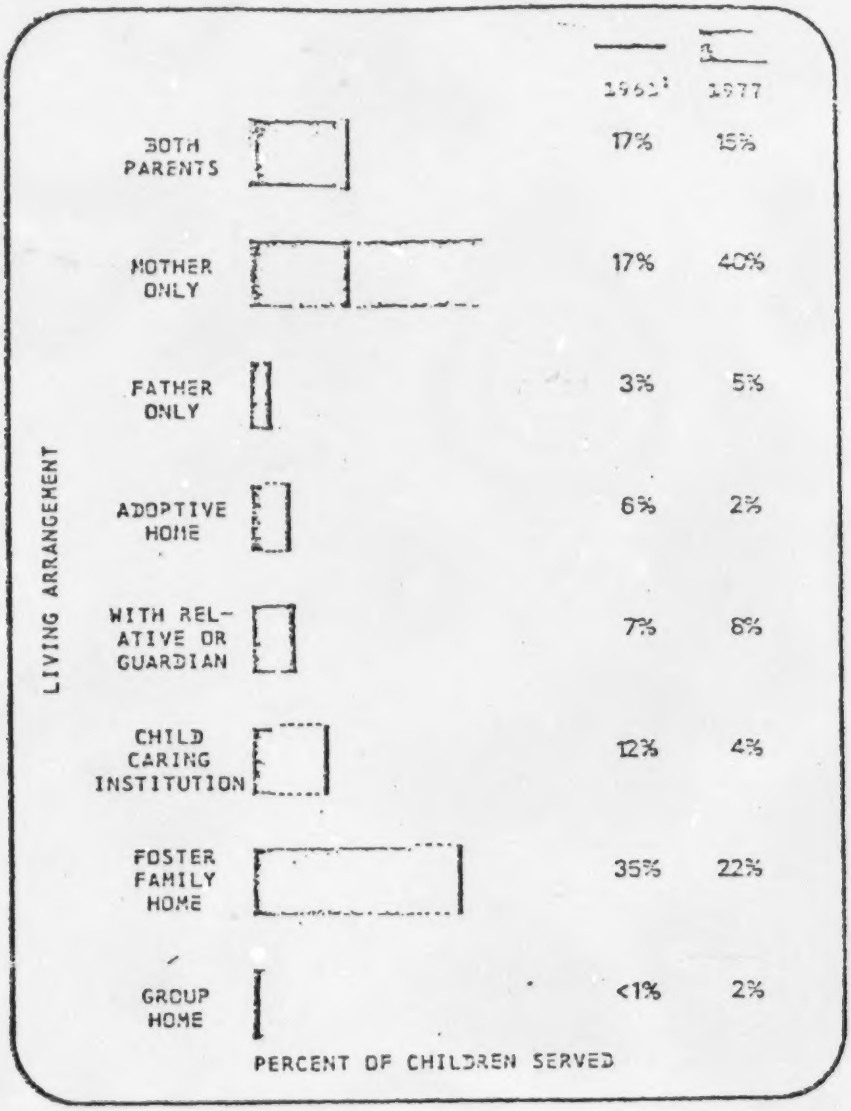
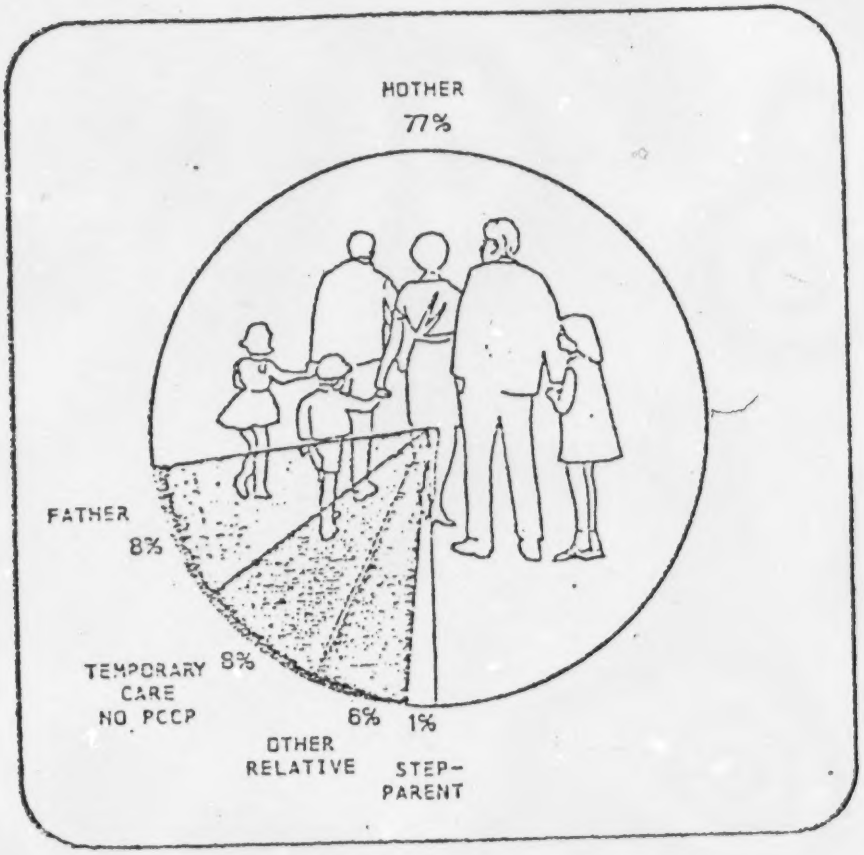


Table 2. Age of children receiving social services from public agencies by living arrangement

Living arrangement	Median age (years)	Percent of children in each age category						
		Total	Under 1 year	1-3 years	4-6 years	7-10 years	11-14 years	15-17 years
With parent(s)	7.7	60	64	72	72	61	49	46
With relative(s)	10.4	8	8	7	7	8	8	10
In adoptive home	5.6	2	10	3	2	3	2	*
In foster care	11.7	28	17	18	19	28	39	36
Elsewhere	15.8	2	1	*	*	*	2	7
Total		100	100	100	100	100	100	100

*Less than 0.5 percent

Chart 5. Principal child-caring person (PCCP) of children receiving social services from public agencies



Information was obtained on the marital status of the parents of 82% of the children. Thirty-five percent had been married previously but the marriage had been broken, usually by divorce (25%), or separation (4%), rather than by death (6%) (Chart 6). The parents of 30% of the children being served were currently married, and two out of three of these married couples were living together. The parents of 17% of the children had never been married to each other, and very few of these couples lived together. Only 22% of the children had parents who were living together.

Parents had the legal custody of 65% of the children. Most of the others (30%) were in the custody of an agency, usually by court order.

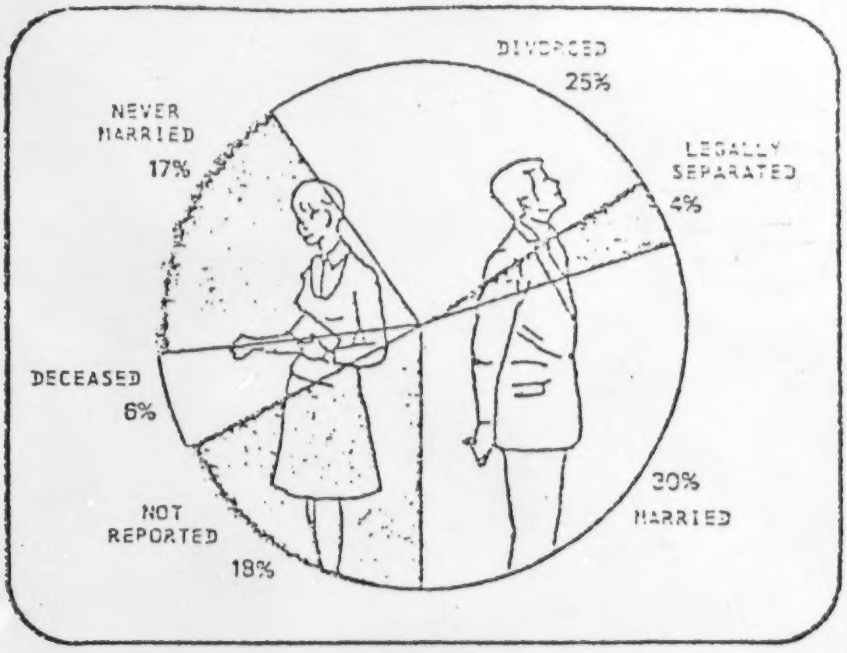
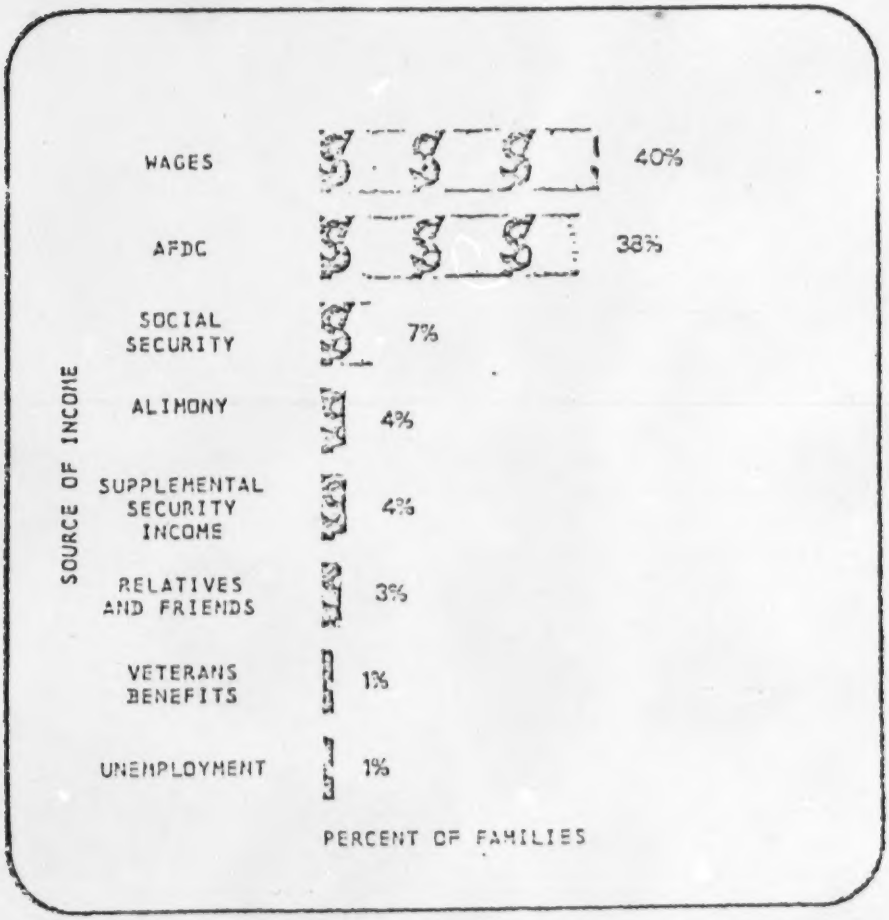


Chart 7. Sources of income for families of children receiving social services from public agencies



Wages and AFDC were about equally often reported as a main source of family support--for 722,000 children or 40%, wages were a main source of support, and for 670,000 or 38%, AFDC (Chart 7). Social Security ranked third, but it was a major source of income for only 117,000, or 7%. The 1977 AFDC percentage (38) was more than twice that of the 18% reported in 1961. This may have been caused by the difference in sampling.

Introduction to the Agency

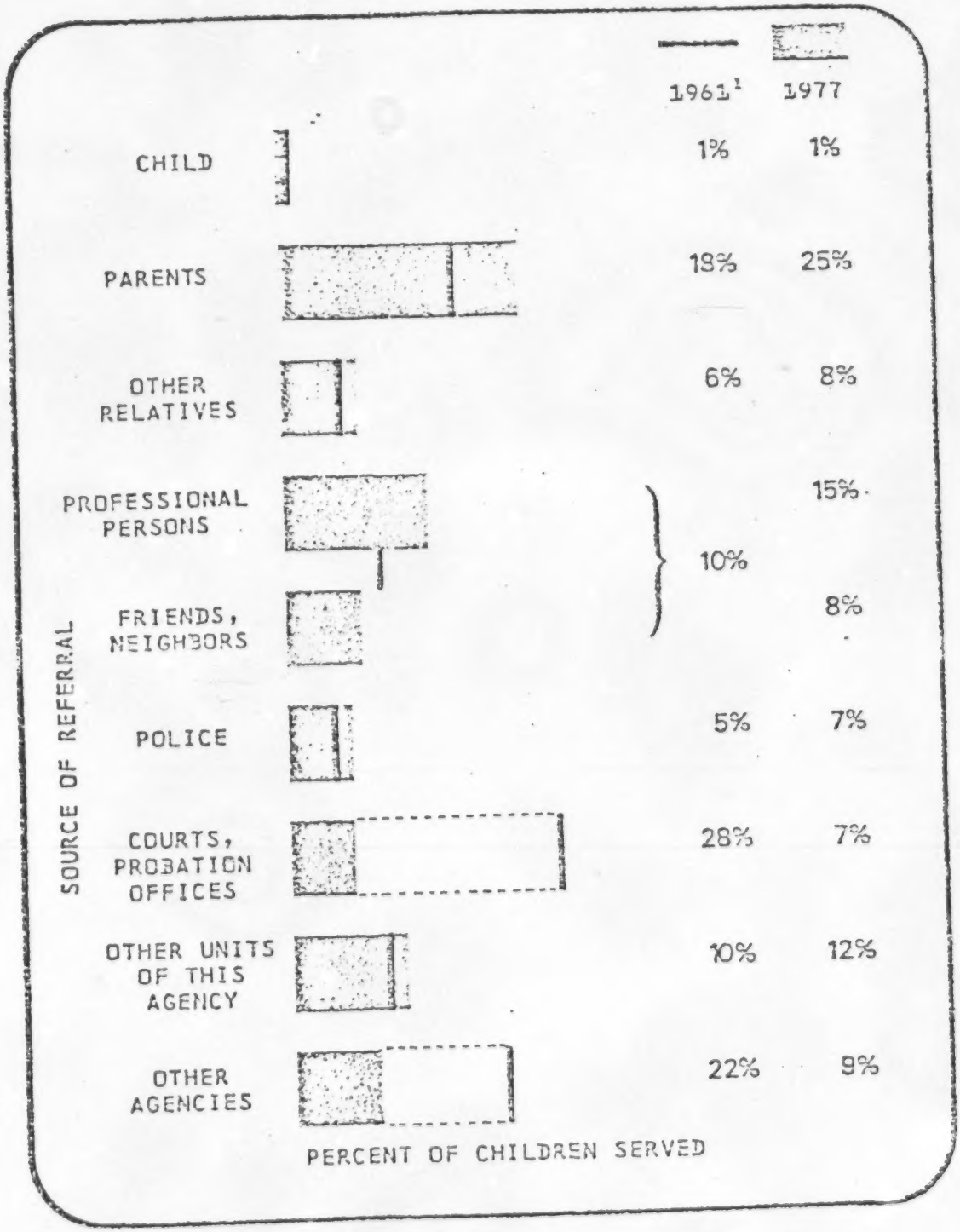
How long had the children been known to the agency? At one extreme are 22% or about 367,000 children who had first come to agency attention within the last 6 months, and at the other are 24% or over 400,000 children introduced to the agency 4 or more years earlier (Table 3). The time lapse from the first contact to the survey date was shorter for the children in the current survey than for those studied in 1961. Over a third of the 1977 group (37%) had been known to the agency less than 1 year, compared with 15% in 1961, while the percentages known 4 years or longer were 24% in 1977 and 34% in 1961.

Data on sources of referral show a marked shift from formal or official sources in 1961 to informal or personal sources in 1977 (Chart 8). Parents referred 25% of the children served in 1977, compared with 18% of the 1961 study population. Professional persons, such as teachers, doctors, attorneys, and clergy, ranked second with 15%. Referrals from other units of the agency accounted for 12%, only slightly higher than in 1961. On the other hand, only 9% of the children had been referred by other agencies in 1977, and 7% by courts and probation offices, sharp reductions from the figures of 22% and 28%, respectively, in the earlier study.

Table 3. Length of time children receiving social services were known to the agency

Length of time known to agency	Percent of children
Less than 6 months	22
6 - 11 months	15
One but less than two years	19
Two but less than three years	12
Three but less than four years	7
[illegible]	24

Chart 8. Source of referral for children receiving social services from public agencies - comparison of 1961 and 1977 findings



Source: [1]Children, Problems, and Services in Child Welfare Programs, 1961.

Most of the children and their families brought multiple problems to the agency, about three problems per case on the average. The most important reasons children were receiving service in 1977 were widely diversified. Of the 33 reasons on the questionnaire, the 8 reasons indicated most frequently are given in Table 4.

Some of the problems of greatest popular concern, such as teenage pregnancy, status offenders, and drug addiction, were relatively infrequent. Thus, these problems are not being brought to the public agencies as primary reasons for service, and this finding may indicate a failure by the agencies to reach the children affected. For example, although 1 million teenagers a year become pregnant, less than 20,000 of the children served by public social service agencies presented this problem. Table 5 shows the percentage of cases in which each problem was given as the one most important reason for the child's receipt of service in March 1977.

Because of the difference in the classification used in the 1961 and 1977 surveys, comparison of the incidence of major reasons is difficult. Without doubt, the combined category of neglect, abuse, and exploitation headed the list in both years, but the percentage was substantially lower in 1977. The percentage of children being served because of a parent's illness, the child's physical handicap, or the child's mental retardation was also lower in 1977. The relative incidence of emotional or behavioral problems in the child appears to have remained the same. Financial need also occurred as the major reason for services with equal frequency--5% of the cases--in both years.

Table 4. Most frequently cited primary reasons for receiving social services

Reason	1977 Percent	1961[1] Percent
Neglect of child	15	36
Abuse of child	7	
Financial need	5	5
Emotional problems of parent	4	*
Emotional problems of child	4	9
Conflict in parent/ child relationship	4	5
Abandonment of child	3	*
Unwillingness to care for child	3	*

*No figure given

Source: [1]Children, Problems, and Services in Child Welfare Programs, 1961

Table 5. Most important reason for receiving social services

Reason	Percent of cases	Reason	Percent of cases
Child Reasons		Family Reasons	
Child of teenage mother	0.7	Abandonment of child	2.8
Difficulty in adjustment on return from foster care	1.2	Alcoholism of father	0.5
Emotional or behavioral problems		Alcoholism of mother	1.3
Alcoholism	*	Conflict in parent/child relationship	4.0
Community behavior	*	Drug addiction of father	*
Delinquency	1.7	Drug addiction of mother	*
Drug addiction	*	Emotional problem of parent	4.3
Emotional problems	4.2	Mental illness of parent	1.7
Home behavior	2.0	Mental retardation of parent	0.7
Prostitution	*	Neglect, abuse, exploitation	
School behavior	1.5	Neglect	15.0
Status offender	1.8	Abuse	6.5
Mental retardation	1.7	Exploitation	*
Physical handicap	1.3	Parent arrested, in prison	0.8
Physical illness	0.9	Physical illness of parent	1.4
Teenage pregnancy	0.6	Prostitution of mother	*
Environmental Circumstances		Unwillingness to care for child	2.8
Financial need	4.5	Other	32.1
Inadequate housing	1.2		

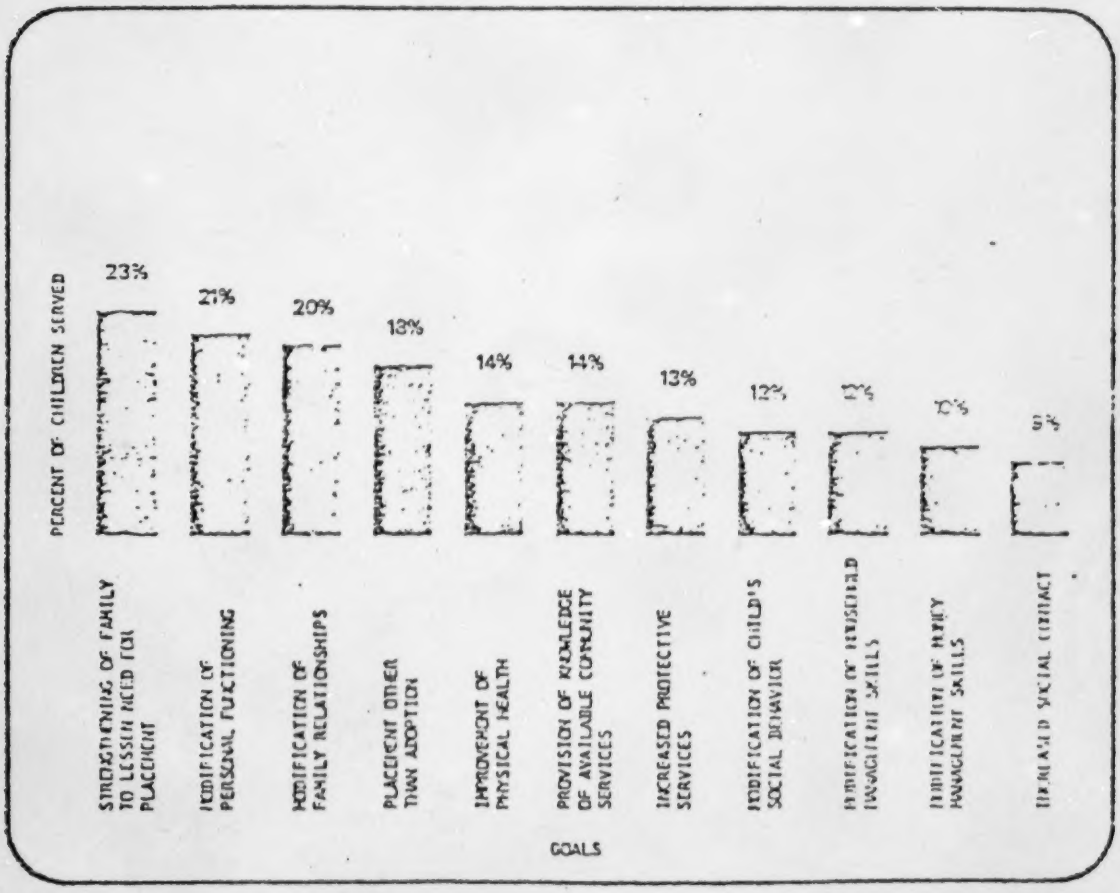
*Less than 0.5 percent

If one were to try to conjure up, and this phrase is used advisedly, a picture of the typical child receiving services in March 1977, it would look something like this--a white school girl or boy about 9 years 8 months old, living with his or her mother. The mother previously was married to the child's father, but is now divorced or separated from him. This household is likely to be supported by AFDC payments or by the mother's earnings. The child probably came to the attention of the agency within the past 2 years, because of parental neglect or because of emotional problems in parent or child, or conflict between them. The trouble with this composite picture is the large proportion of children it does not fit--the many living in foster homes or with both parents, the many preschoolers and adolescents, the substantial numbers of black and Hispanic children, and the many being served because of financial need or parental unwillingness to care for the child.

Agency Service Plans and Activities

The case records of about two-thirds of the children included service plans, usually written or revised in 1976 or 1977. Service plans were less common for children living with one or both parents than for other children. Most of the plans included service goals for the child (80%), (Chart 9), and many included such goals for the family (64%). Usually multiple goals were set, just over three, on the average, for cases with any specified goals. The three goals most frequently reported were "strengthening the family to lessen the need for placement of children" (25% of all cases), "modification of personal functioning/mental health" (29%), and "modification of family relationships"(20%). These goals, which imply change in feelings, attitudes, and relationships, were much more often articulated than were goals with respect to such practical skills as household management, money management, or use of community resources.

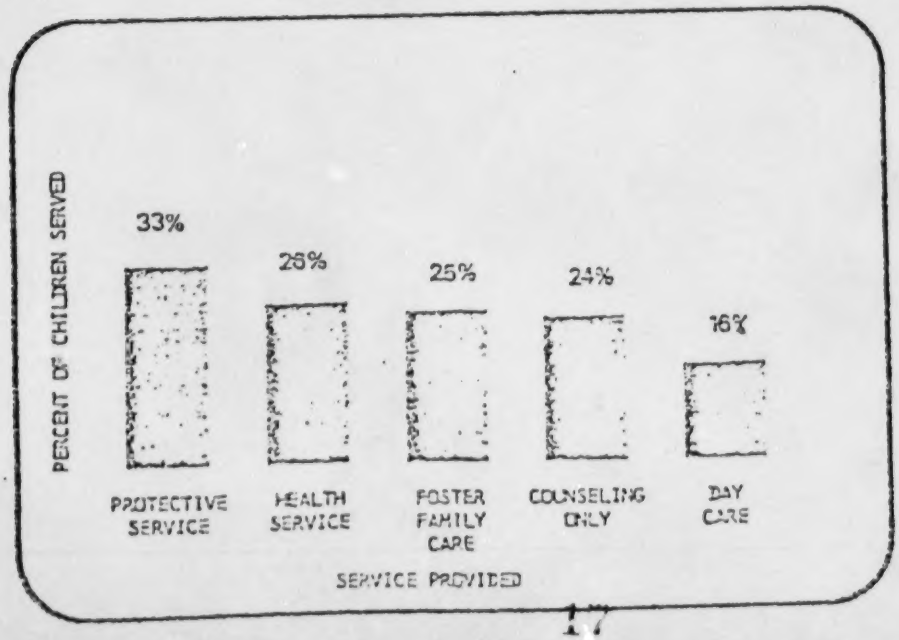
Chart 9. Most frequently cited service plan goals for children receiving social services from public agencies



Helping the child to become part of a new family through adoption was seen as an appropriate objective in a relatively small fraction of cases; freeing the child for adoption and placement in an adoptive home were each stated as a goal for about 4% of the 1.8 million cases. Placement other than adoptive placement was a goal in 18% of the cases, very close in frequency to the top three goals mentioned above, a reflection of the common tendency to regard placement of the child as an end in itself rather than as a means to an end.

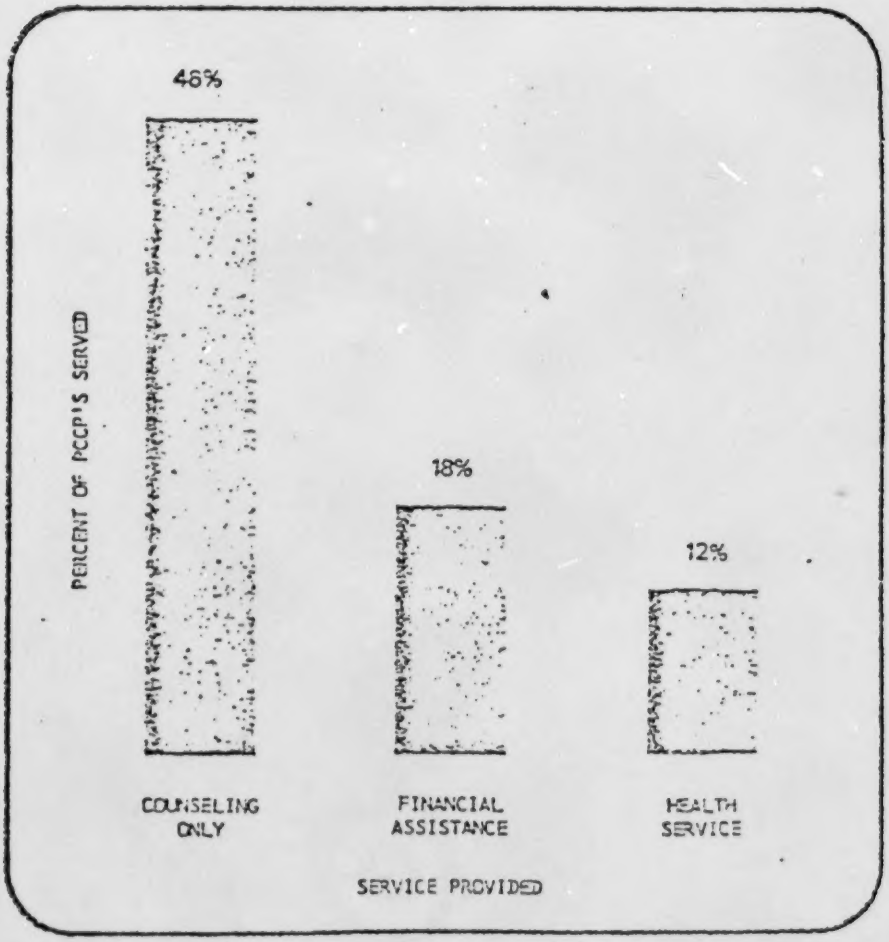
In view of the frequency of neglect or abuse as the most important problem, it is hardly surprising that protective service (which includes identification and investigation as well as treatment) led the list of services provided to children, with 33% of the children receiving this service (Chart 10). The other services given to at least 10% of the children were: health service, 26%; foster family care, 25%; counseling (not as part of another specific service), 24%; day care, 16%; transportation, 11%; educational service, 11%; and mental health service, 10%.

Chart 10. Most frequently cited social services being provided to children by public agencies



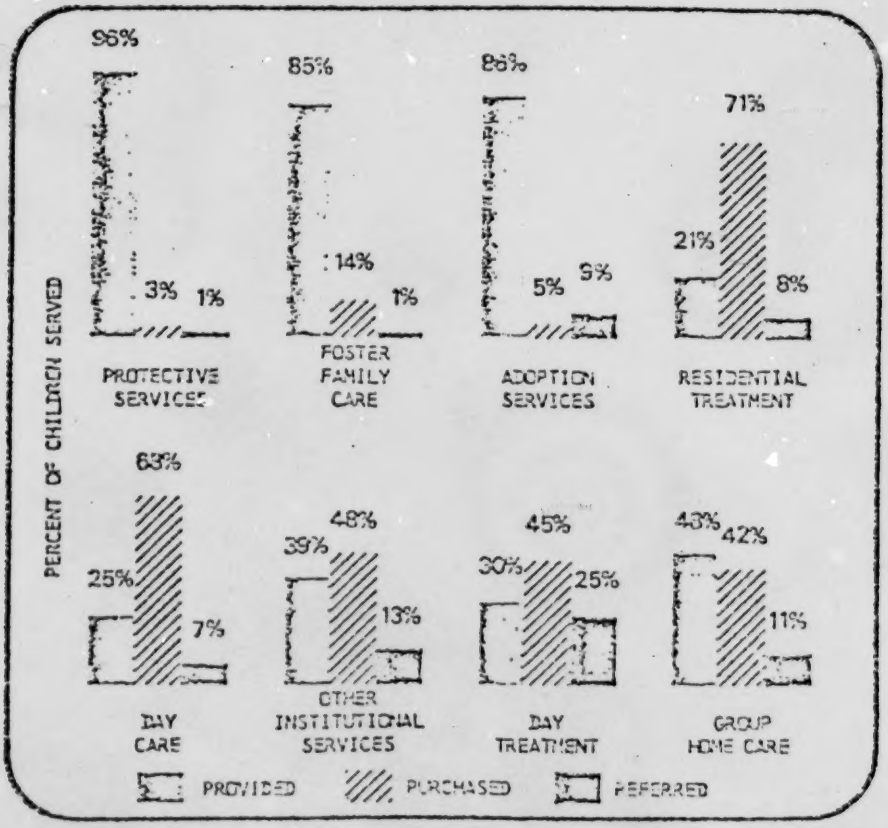
Counseling was given to the principal child-caring person (PCCP) for nearly half the children (46%) (Chart 11). Financial assistance ranked second (18%) among services to the PCCP, and health service ranked third (12%). Homemaker service was provided in only 7% of the cases.

Chart 11. Most frequently cited social services being provided to the principal child-caring person (PCCP) by public agencies



Protective services, foster family care, adoption, and counseling were provided directly by the public social service departments to more than 75% of the children who received these services (Chart 12). The departments relied heavily on purchase of service for five other basic child welfare services: residential treatment, 71%; day care, 68%; institutional services, 48%; day treatment, 45%; and group home care, 42%. For each of these services except day care, the service was purchased more often from a proprietary (for-profit) agency than from a voluntary (non-profit) agency or another public agency; on day care, the split was even. Educational, health, and mental health services usually were arranged through referral or through purchase from a public agency.

Chart 12. Social services provided directly, purchased, or referred by public agencies



The amount of contact between agency staff and the children and families being served is a matter of considerable interest, but it is not easy to determine from case records. Questions about contacts (face-to-face or by telephone) with the child, the principal child-caring person, and jointly with child and PCCP frequently elicited ambiguous answers. It appears that, for cases for which an entry was given on the questionnaire, there was no contact during the first 3 months of 1977 with 31% of the children and 18% of the PCCPs. At the other extreme are the cases in which there were three or more contacts with the child alone (17%), the PCCP alone (25%), and with the child and PCCP (14%). For roughly a fourth of the cases, regular contact of each of the three types was reported.

Agency Staff

In view of the multiplicity of problems in the cases, the complexity of goals of service, and the responsibility of the caseworker to deal with interpersonal as well as practical problems, the education and experience the workers brought to their tasks are important. Twenty-five percent of the children were assigned to caseworkers with a social work degree, 9% at the graduate level and 16% at the bachelor level (Chart 13). Slightly more than two-thirds of the children had caseworkers with 4 or more years of college education in some field other than social work. Five percent were served by workers with less than a 4-year college degree.

Chart 13. Education of caseworkers assigned to children receiving social services from public agencies

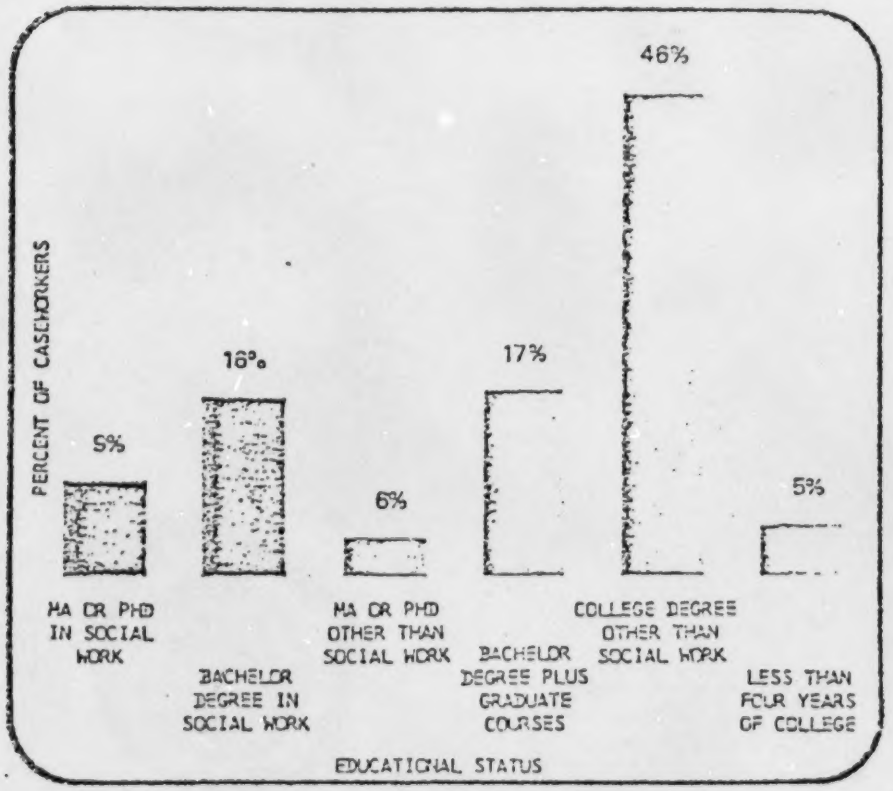


Chart 14. Experience of caseworkers assigned to children receiving social services from public agencies